

立法會

Legislative Council

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Meeting of the Panel on Education on 8 November 2004

Background Brief prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat

Implementation of Small Class Teaching

Purpose

This paper summarizes the discussions of the Panel on Education (the Panel) on the studies on small class teaching in public sector schools proposed by the Administration and related issues since the first term of the Legislative Council (LegCo). This paper also provides information on the relevant questions/motions raised/moved at Council meetings.

Background

2. In 1992, the Education Commission Report No.5 (ECR5) recommended, among others, a reduction in the standard class size of five places at each level from Primary 1 (P1) to Secondary 5 (S5) by phases and improvement of teacher-to-class ratio. The Government, however, decided in 1997 to adjust the reduction of places from five to three in order to speed up the implementation of whole-day primary schooling.
3. When the Panel discussed “Improving the student-teacher ratio in primary and secondary schools” on 18 January 1999, members expressed concern about the heavy workload of teachers, particularly those teaching in schools with a large number of band five students. Members in general expressed support for reducing the class sizes in public sector schools in order to improve the quality of school education. They urged the Administration to set out the policies and timetable on reduction of class sizes in primary and secondary schools.
4. In response to an oral question raised by Hon SZETO Wah at the Council meeting on 13 November 2002, the Secretary for Education and Manpower confirmed that the Administration was contemplating the conduct of a pilot study on

small class teaching in 30 to 40 public sector primary schools from the 2003-04 school year. The participating schools would try out the class size of about 20 students at junior primary levels. Relevant professional training and support would be provided to the teachers as appropriate. Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong also moved a motion at the Council meeting on 27 November 2002 urging the Government to implement small class teaching in primary and secondary schools in a gradual and orderly manner so as to achieve the ultimate target of 25 students per class. The motion was negated.

The proposal of a longitudinal study on small class teaching

5. The Administration informed the Panel in November 2002 that although there had been calls for a reduction in class size in primary education, overseas experience shown that reducing class size per se might have very little effect on the quality of education. It was necessary to find out the necessary pre-conditions and teaching strategies which would maximise the benefit of small class size. The Administration therefore proposed to conduct a longitudinal study on the impact of small class size from the 2003-04 school year.

6. Some members queried the need to conduct the longitudinal study. They considered that the benefits of small class teaching were apparent and all teachers would support its implementation as it certainly would facilitate class management and improve student-teacher interactions in a class room setting. Some other members, however, expressed concern about the huge costs incurred for the implementation of small class teaching. They considered that other initiatives, such as reducing the student-teacher ratio, could also improve the quality of education.

7. The Administration explained to the Panel that in view of the substantial resources required for implementing small class teaching in public sector primary schools, it needed to conduct a longitudinal study in selected primary schools to find out the relationship between small class teaching and its effectiveness on teaching and learning. The longitudinal study would be designed to help determine the optimal class size for primary education and identify the role and functions of teachers in teaching and learning in both small and regular classes for the formulation of long-term policies and strategies in primary education. The Administration also pointed out that the student-teacher ratio of 20.8:1 at that time was comparable to those of the western countries. The establishment of a long term policy on reduction of class size would require corresponding changes to the pedagogy. It should also be based on solid evidence of positive learning outcome and subject to the availability of resources.

8. Some members suggested that the Administration should consider maintaining the education allocation to primary schools at the current level and allow them to operate smaller classes in case their student enrolment decreased as a result of a declining student population. They considered that the Administration should

consult frontline teachers on the merits of small class teaching rather than relying on the results of a longitudinal study.

The study on effective strategies of class and group teaching in primary schools

9. At the Panel meetings on 19 May and 16 June 2003, members discussed with the Administration its proposal to conduct a study on effective strategies of class and group teaching in primary schools (the Study). According to the Administration, the Study, which replaced the longitudinal study, aimed to identify the good practices in small class and variable group teaching in selected public sector primary schools for dissemination to and adaptation by other schools for enhancing learning effectiveness.

10. Some members considered that the Study was in essence different from the longitudinal study originally proposed. They pointed out that variable class size and group teaching strategies did not mean a reduction in class size but only flexible adjustment of class sizes to suit different learning and teaching activities in selected primary schools. These members considered that small class teaching would certainly enhance the quality of teaching and learning in primary schools. They urged the Administration to take the opportunity to implement small class teaching in schools located at districts where the student population had significantly decreased.

11. The Administration pointed out that while all public sector primary schools were provided with similar level of resources, some schools had managed to practise variable class size and group teaching strategies to enhance learning effectiveness. The Administration would conduct a six-month survey (the first stage of the Study) to identify the existing good practices of effective small and variable group teaching strategies adopted in schools.

12. The Administration subsequently briefed the Panel on the preliminary findings of the first stage of the Study and implementation of the second stage of the Study on 16 February 2004. The findings of the first stage of the Study and implementation of the second stage of the Study are detailed in the Administration's paper [LC Paper No. CB(2)1282/03-04(01)].

13. According to the Administration, participating schools would be given additional time-limited resources during the second stage of the Study to operate small classes of about 25 students at P1 and then proceeding to P2 for two consecutive cohorts. The students would return to regular classes at P3. The Administration would follow up the two cohorts of students longitudinally beyond P2 to see whether the benefits of small class teaching at P1 and P2 could be sustained as they move up to higher levels, and whether they would compare favourably in terms of their affective and academic domains with students of similar background in other schools not participating in the Study. The Study would last for four years and the Administration would consider the interim findings to determine the way forward for small class teaching.

Members' concerns about the Study and the Administration's responses

The need to conduct the Study

14. Some members queried the need to conduct a four-year Study when all, including the Administration, agreed that teaching in small classes would be better than in large classes if all other factors were equal. They suggested that the Administration should have worked out a timetable for progressive implementation of small class teaching in all public sector schools after the completion of the Study. The Administration explained that there were views in the education community that small class teaching was not necessarily the best way to improve the quality of education, and that the professionalism of teachers was more important in improving quality of education. Given the fiscal deficits, many academics also considered small class teaching not cost-effective. They suggested that resources should be used in other education areas.

Number of participating schools

15. Some members considered that to enhance its reliability and comprehensiveness, the Study should include a wider variety of primary and secondary schools with different teaching and learning characteristics, and cover different levels of classes and subjects.

16. The Administration pointed out that there were successful and unsuccessful experiences in the implementation of small class teaching in overseas countries. Given the divergent views and the significant resources implications and hence the displacement effect of small class teaching, the Administration would have to ascertain its benefits in local school environment before deciding on the way forward. As curriculum adaptation and change in teaching pedagogies were essential to the success of small class teaching, the Administration would provide support and training to serving teachers in the development of the skills and pedagogies for effective teaching in small classes. If the results of the Study were positive, the Administration would draw up a timetable for progressive implementation of small class teaching in other schools.

Evaluation

17. Some members expressed concern that implementation of small class teaching would hinge on the evaluation of the Study to be made by a Steering Committee only. They considered it inappropriate that the result of the Study might be assessed on the basis of the performance of the participating schools with mainly band 3 students or new arrival children with those schools with a large enrolment of band 1 students. These members also queried how the learning process and outcomes of students in the participating schools could be objectively assessed and compared with those of their counterparts in other schools.

18. The Administration explained that the Steering Committee would comprise two local academics and three primary school heads. The Administration would provide school-based support and organize briefings and workshops for teachers before the start of the Study and at intervals throughout the Study. For evaluation purpose, the performance improvements of the participating schools and their students would be assessed by comparison with other schools having a similar student enrolment in the assessment process.

The review on the implementation of the recommendations of ECR5 on improving teacher-student ratios and class sizes in primary and secondary schools

19. When the Panel met with deputations and the Administration on “the Review on the implementation of the recommendations of ECR5 on improving teacher-student ratios and class sizes in primary and secondary schools” on 19 July 2004, the issue of small class teaching was also discussed. Deputations in general considered that the class sizes in primary and secondary schools should be reduced to 30 students, and requested early implementation of small class teaching in the light of a declining student population.

20. Some members considered that the Administration should provide a timetable for the implementation of the relevant recommendations in ECR5 and suggested that the Administration should redeploy savings achieved through reduction of classes and the phasing-out of under-utilized schools to finance the implementation of the recommendations.

21. The Administration explained that to improve the teacher-to-class ratio in whole-day primary schools from the present 1.4:1 to 1.5:1 would entail significant recurrent staff costs. Taking the projected position in the 2007-08 school year as an example, the additional annual staff cost would be around \$385 million. As regards class size in primary schools, the Administration would implement the Study from the 2004-05 school year, which would throw light on the impact of small class on student learning, and the supportive conditions necessary to enhance the impact.

22. The Administration agreed with the deputations’ view that the forecast decline in student population over the next 10 years provided an opportunity for improving teacher-to-class ratio or reducing class sizes in schools. The Administration, however, pointed out that given the prevailing budgetary constraints and uncertainty over the amount of education funding available, it was not possible to contemplate any improvement in staffing or class size at this stage. Nevertheless, the Administration would continue to do its best, within the professional and financial resources available, to enhance support to schools and teachers.

Questions and motions on small class teaching and related issues

23. Members had raised/moved a number of questions/motions on implementation of small class teaching, improvement of teacher-student ratios and reduction of class sizes in primary and secondary schools at different Council meetings since the first term of LegCo, a list of which in chronological order is in **Appendix I**. The Official Records of Proceedings of the relevant Council meetings are available on the LegCo website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk>.

Relevant papers

24. The minutes of the relevant Panel meetings and the Administration's papers for discussion of small class teaching and related issues are listed in **Appendix II**. Soft copies of these documents are available on the LegCo website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk>.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
2 November 2004

Appendix I

Questions/Motions moved at Council meetings on/related to implementation of small class teaching

<u>Date of Council Meeting</u>	<u>Motion/Question</u>
15-7-98	Oral question on “Class sizes in primary and secondary schools” raised by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
30-9-98	Written question on “Class sizes of primary and secondary schools” raised by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
14-10-98	Written question on “School places of primary six and junior forms of secondary schools” raised by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
19-12-01	Written question on “Teacher-student ratios” raised by Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung
3-7-02	Oral question on “Plan to reduce the number of primary one classes in the coming school year” raised by Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung
13-11-02	Oral question on “Trial scheme for teaching in small classes” raised by Hon SZETO Wah
27-11-02	Motion on “Teaching in small classes” moved by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
3-12-03	Motion on “Education Policy” moved by Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong

Appendix II

Relevant documents for discussion of small class teaching and related issues at Panel meetings

Date of meeting	Paper	LC Paper No.
18-1-99	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)1973/98-99</u>
	Admin paper entitled “Improving the student-teacher ratio in primary and secondary schools”	<u>CB(2)1063/98-99(02)</u>
18-11-02	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)627/02-03</u>
	Admin paper entitled “Priorities in Education for 2002-03”	<u>CB(2)155/02-03(01)</u>
19-5-03	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)2404/02-03</u>
	Admin paper entitled “Study on effective strategies of class and group teaching in primary schools”	<u>CB(2)1826/02-03(06)</u>
16-6-03	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)2974/02-03</u>
16-2-04	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)2015/03-04</u>
	Admin paper entitled “Study on effective strategies of class and group teaching in primary schools	<u>CB(2)1282/03-04(01)</u>
	Admin paper entitled “Study on small class teaching”	<u>CB(2)2844/03-04(01)</u>
19-7-04	Minutes of the meeting	<u>CB(2)3330/03-04</u>
	Admin paper entitled “Teacher-to-class ratios and class sizes in primary and secondary schools”	<u>CB(2)3088/03-04(01)</u>